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United States Department of State
Bureau of Consular Affairs

Tips for Travelers to Mexico

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Cover: Mariachis entertain during a local festival.

General

Mexicans are proud of their independence, history, unique culture, and their rapid progress over the past 75 years. They are hospitable people and treat visitors with courtesy.

U.S. travelers to Mexico should be aware of the following regulations and suggestions in order to avoid inconvenience or serious difficulty.

Entry Requirements

U.S. citizens visiting for no more than 72 hours within 20 kilometers of Mexico's northern and southern borders, do not need any type of permit. Those transiting Mexico to another country need a transit visa (FM6), which is valid for up to 30 days upon payment of a nominal fee. All Americans visiting Mexico solely for tourism or study for up to 180 days, need a tourist document, commonly called a tourist card in English or FMT in Spanish, to enter and leave Mexico. The FMT is issued upon presentation of proof of citizenship (U.S. passport or U.S. birth certificate plus drivers license or other photo I.D.). The FMT is free and may be obtained from Mexican consulates, Mexican tourism offices, Mexican immigration officers at ports of entry, and most airlines serving Mexico. Tourist cards are issued for a maximum of 180 days. Tourist cards issued for less than full validity may be revalidated by the Mexican immigration service (Direccion General de Servicios Migratorios).

Entry and Exit Requirements for Children

If children are included on the parents' card, all must leave Mexico together, unless prior arrangements are made with the Mexican immigration service. Children traveling with only one parent must have written, notarized consent from the other parent to travel, and it must be authenticated at a Mexican consulate. Children traveling without either parent must have notarized consent from both parents, authenticated at a Mexican consulate.

Customs Laws

Tourists should enter Mexico with only the items needed for their trip. Entering with large quantities of an item—particularly expensive appliances such as TV's or stereos or other items a tourist might not normally be expected to have—may lead to suspicion of smuggling and possible confiscation. Do not bring firearms or ammunition into Mexico without prior arrangement through Mexican consular authorities. Be sure that Mexican customs officials check both the firearms and the permit authorizing their entry into Mexico. Visitors should verify at the initial customs inspection in Mexico that the items they have in their possession may be legally brought into the country. Travelers by land should be aware they will be subject to a second immigration and customs inspection, and unlawful items may be seized and travelers prosecuted regardless of whether or not the items passed through the initial customs inspection.

Currency Regulations

The Government of Mexico has lifted the currency controls imposed in September 1982 and modified its exchange rate system. Tourists can now exchange their dollars for pesos at a free market rate. This rate reflects market conditions and is subject to change. The government has eliminated restrictions on the import or export of bank notes. There are no restrictions on the export of reasonable quantities of Mexican coins.

Personal U.S. checks are rarely accepted by Mexican hotels or banks. It is advisable to bring travelers checks with you. Major credit cards are accepted in many hotels, shops, and restaurants.

Health

Smallpox vaccinations are no longer required to enter Mexico. In high altitude areas such as Mexico City, most people need only a short adjustment period; others, none at all. Spend the first few days in as leisurely a manner as possible, with a light diet and reduced intake of alcoholic beverages. Reaction signs to high altitude are lack of energy, a tendency to tire more easily than usual, shortness of breath, occasional dizziness, and insomnia. Drink only bottled water. Vegetables and fruits eaten raw should be washed and peeled.

Driving in Mexico

Tourists driving to Mexico must obtain temporary vehicle import permits, which are issued at border entry points and are generally valid for the same period of time as tourist permits. You must remove your car from Mexico before the vehicle permit expires or, if issued for less than 180 days, have the permit extended by the Temporary Importation Department of Mexican Customs offices. Failure to do so may result in confiscation of the vehicle. Mexican automobile insurance is sold in most cities and towns on both sides of the border. It should be obtained at the time of crossing the border, as U.S. automobile liability insurance is not valid in Mexico nor is collision and comprehensive coverage issued by most U.S. companies. U.S. motorists who become involved in traffic accidents run the risk of spending time in jail pending determination of liability and ability to pay any judgment, even though the case may eventually be decided in their favor. This underscores the need for insurance coverage from a Mexican firm.

You may not sell, transfer, or otherwise dispose of a car brought into Mexico under the temporary importation permit, nor may you leave Mexico without the car. In case of emergency or following an accident where the car cannot be removed, permission to depart Mexico without the car can be obtained by the owner through the Mexican Customs Office in Mexico City, or through the local office of the Treasury Department (Hacienda) in other cities. Under no circumstances should the owner of a vehicle allow anyone else to drive it unless the owner is a passenger. To do otherwise can result in confiscation of the vehicle and a heavy fine.

Highway construction and provision of services have not matched increased highway usage in Mexico. As a result, travelers should exercise care in planning their trips to permit the best usage of sometimes limited gas stations, restaurants, motels, and auto repair facilities. Watch for animals on the loose and heavy truck traffic on some routes.

Safety Tips for Traveling in Mexico

While most Americans travel to Mexico and return safely, having had an enjoyable visit, travelers should realize that Mexico is a foreign country with its own laws, customs, and standards of behavior. As in any other country, visitors to Mexico can become victims of crime. Furthermore, some visitors are the objects of harrassment, mistreatment, and extortion by persons who represent themselves as officials. Americans visiting Mexico should be aware that the U.S. Embassy and Consulates must act within the confines of local law. Accordingly, visitors should take appropriate precautions.

Avoid driving alone at night and never sleep in vehicles along the road. Particular caution should be exercised in certain areas, including Highway 15 in the State of Sinaloa and Highway 40 between the city of Durango and the Pacific coast, where a number of assaults have occurred in the past.

Travelers may wish to check with local authorities or the nearest U.S. Consular Office for an update on local conditions, and to make themselves aware of other areas of current potential danger. Visitors to Mexican resorts should carefully assess the risk potential in recreational activities and be cautious at swimming pools and beaches without lifeguards. Safety regulations and their enforcement in Mexico are generally not equivalent to U.S. standards. Some of the newer resorts lack well-developed medical facilities.

Operation of Citizen's Band (CB) Equipment

American tourists are permitted to operate CB radios in Mexico. A permit valid for 180 days may be obtained from a Mexican consulate or an office of the Mexican tourism office. A valid U.S. citizen's band radio authorization must be presented. There is a nominal fee. These permits are not available at ports of entry. Transmissions on CB equipment are allowed only on channels 9, 10, and 11, and only for personal communication and emergency road assistance. Any device which increases the transmission power to over 5 watts is prohibited. CB equipment may not be used near radio installations of the aeronautical and marine services.

Dual Nationality

Dual nationality can cause problems for individuals and governments. While U.S. law does not specifically allow for dual nationality, the U.S. Government recognizes that Americans may be citizens of other countries.

Under Mexican law, an individual born in Mexico of American parents or, in many cases, of only one American parent, may acquire both nationalities at birth. Also, a U.S. citizen born in the United States of a Mexican father—and after December 26, 1969, of a Mexican mother—has dual national status. A dual national U.S.-Mexican citizen must be documented as a U.S. citizen to travel into and out of the United States.

The Mexican Government recognizes dual nationality from birth to age 18. To obtain a Mexican passport after age 18 or to benefit from Mexican nationality, e.g., own property in a restricted zone, obtain resident tuition rate at a Mexican university, or vote in a Mexican election, dual nationals are required by Mexican law to renounce any other nationality they hold and to swear allegiance to Mexico. This is accomplished by signing an application for a certificate of Mexican nationality containing a renunciation clause and an oath of allegiance to Mexico. This form is issued by the Secretariat of Foreign Relations. It should be fully understood that under U.S. law, signing the application after age 18 will most likely result in loss of U.S. nationality. It is urged that prior to obtaining a certificate of Mexican nationality, a dual national should consult with the nearest U.S. consul.

Judicial System, Drugs, and Other Offenses

The Mexican judicial system is based on Roman and Napoleonic law and does not presume the person accused of a crime to be innocent until proven guilty. Trial under this system is a prolonged process based largely on documents examined in court on a fixed date by prosecution and defense counsel. There is no trial by jury nor writ of habeas corpus in the Anglo-American sense. Bail exists, but is usually not granted to foreigners on the assumption they will depart Mexico. While an individual is guaranteed certain rights under the Mexican constitution, those

rights are subject to interpretation under Mexican judicial procedures that often differ significantly from U.S. constitutional guarantees and judicial procedures. Americans in Mexico are subject to Mexican law, not U.S. law.

Mexican law considers possession of and trafficking in illegal drugs to be a federal offense. Mexico rigorously prosecutes drug cases. Since Mexican law does not differentiate between "hard" drugs (e.g., heroin) and "soft" drugs (e.g., marijuana or amphetamines), all offenders are subject to tough prison sentences if found guilty. It is not uncommon for persons charged with drug offenses to be detained for up to 1 year before a verdict is reached.

Nonpayment of hotel bills or failure to pay for other services rendered is considered fraud under Mexican law, subjecting the accused to arrest.

Prisoners

A treaty exists between the United States and Mexico under which qualified nationals of each country who have been arrested and convicted of certain criminal offenses in the other country may be returned to prison in their respective countries to complete their sentences. As of 1985, over 700 Americans and more than 450 Mexicans have been transferred back to prison in their respective countries. This treaty does not, as some believe, provide for trial in the home country of the accused, nor is it applicable to the following categories of prisoners: (1) those whom the transferring country declines to transfer or the receiving country declines to accept; (2) those who are domiciled in the convicting country; (3) those for whom an appeal or application for writ of relief is still pending; (4) those with less than 6 months of their sentences remaining; and (5) those convicted of certain specified offenses including political and immigration offenses.

Bringing Pets Into Mexico

U.S. visitors to Mexico may bring a dog, cat, or up to four canaries by presenting the following certificates at the border:

(1) a pet health certificate signed by a registered veterinarian in the United States and issued not more than 72 hours before the animal enters Mexico; and

(2) a pet vaccination certificate showing that the animal has been treated for rabies, hepatitis, pip, and leptospirosis.

Certification by Mexican consular authorities is not required for the health or vaccination certificate. A permit fee is charged at the time of entry into Mexico.

Useful Addresses and Telephone/Telex Numbers

NOTE: All daytime telephone numbers dialed from the United States are preceded by 011-52.

U.S. EMBASSY
Paseo de la Reforma 305,
Mexico 5, D.F.
Tel 211-0042 (Local)
Tel 011-52-5-211-0042 (US)
Telex 017-73-091 and 017-75-685

U.S. Export Development Office/U.S. Trade Center
Tel 591-0155 (day) (Local)
Tel 011-52-5-591-0155 (day) (US)
Telex 01773471

CONSULATES (C) AND CONSULATES GENERAL (CG)

Ciudad Juarez (CG), Chihuahua
Avenue Lopez Mateos 924-N
Tel 34048 (day) (Local)
Tel 011-52-161-34048 (day) (US)
Tel Area Code (915) 544-3100 (night) (US)
Telex 033-840

Guadalajara (CG), Jalisco
Progreso 175
Tel 25-2998; 25-2700 (Local)
Tel 011-52-362-52700 or 011-52-362-52998 (US)
Telex 068-2-860

Hermosillo (C), Sonora
Calle Morelia 139
Tel 3-89-23, 3-89-24, or 3-89-25 (Local)
Tel 011-52-621-38923; 011-52-621-38924; or 011-52-621-38925 (US)
Telex 058-829

Matamoros (C), Tamaulipas
Ave. Primera No. 2002
Tel 2-52-51 or 2-52-52 (Local)
Tel 011-52-891-25251 or 011-52-891-25252 (US)
Telex 035-827

Mazatlan (C), Sinaloa
Circunvalacion No. 120 Centro
Tel 1-29-05; 1-26-85 (Local)
Tel 011-52-678-12905 or 011-52-678-12687 (US)
Telex 066-883

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Merida (C), Yucatan
Paseo Montejo 453,
Tel 5-54-09; 5-50-11 (day) (Local)
Tel 5-50-39 (night) (Local)
Tel 011-52-992-55409 or 011-52-992-55011 (day) (US)
Tel 011-52-992-55039 (night) (US)
Telex 0753885 AMCONME

Monterrey (CG), Nuevo Leon
Avenida Constitucion 411 Poniente
Tel 43-06-50 thru 43-06-59 (Local)
Tel 011-52-83-430650 thru 011-52-83-430659 (US)
Telex 36-849

Nuevo Laredo (C), Tamaulipas
Avenida Allende 3330, Col. Jardin
Tel 4-05-12; 4-06-18; or 4-06-96 (day) (Local)
Tel 011-52-871-40512 (day) (US)
Tel Area Code (512) 727-9661 (night) (US)
Telex 36-849

Tijuana (CG), Baja California
Tapachula 96
Tel 81-77-00 or 81-74-00 (day) (Local)
Tel 011-52-66-817700; 011-52-66-817400 (day) (US)
Tel Area Code (706) 686-1001 thru 686-1005 (day) US)
Tel Area Code (619) 585-2000 (night) US)
Telex 056-6836

Consular Agents

Resident consular agents have been designated in ten other locations in Mexico to assist U.S. citizens in serious emergencies. Each of these consular agents is supervised by one of the above-listed offices and may be contacted through it. The location of the consular agents, with the name of the supervisory office for each, follows:

Acapulco, Guerrero—U.S. Embassy, Mexico City
Cancun, Quintana Roo—U.S. Consulate, Merida
Durango, Durango—U.S. Consulate General, Monterrey
Mulege, Baja California Sur—U.S. Consulate General, Tijuana
Oaxaca, Oaxaca—U.S. Embassy, Mexico City
Puerto Vallarta, Jalisco—U.S. Consulate General, Guadalajara
San Luis Potosi, San Luis Potosi—U.S. Consulate General, Monterrey
San Miguel de Allende, Guanajuato—U.S. Consulate General, Guadalajara
Tampico, Tamaulipas—U.S. Embassy, Mexico City
Veracruz, Veracruz—U.S. Embassy, Mexico City

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